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ABSTRACT

School Development Plans (SDPs) were pioneered by individual schools and local education authorities (LEAs) in England as a grassroots approach to school management that was eventually adopted by national education authorities. An empirical investigation of the implementation and impact of SDPs was carried out in primary schools through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection. With the cooperation of administrators of urban and rural schools, a questionnaire was prepared on attitudes and support for school development planning. This questionnaire, sent to 110 LEAs in England, 12 in Scotland, 8 in Wales, and 5 in Northern Ireland, obtained a 100% response rate. Data were also collected in the schools through interviews and observation in nine case study schools. Results supported a typology that described SDPs as rhetorical, singular, cooperative, or corporate in nature. Only corporate plans, characterized by a united effort to improve and a sense of shared ownership, resulted in real educational change. The more effective the plan was, the more complex its characteristics. The aspect of SDPs that was found to be the weakest was that of formative evaluation, but schools engaged in the corporate type of planning were most likely to use formative evaluation to support the development process. (Contains 39 references.) (SLD)

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ED 389 823

The impact of school development plans in primary schools

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Background

School Development Plans (SDPs) were pioneered by individual schools and local education authorities (LEAs). They represent a 'grassroots' approach to school management which was subsequently, adopted and promulgated nationally by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Department for Education (DFE). SDPs evolved over a ten year period and, from the mid 1980s, this overarching approach to whole-school planning was encouraged explicitly by a number of LEAs across the country (Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) 1985; Essex, 1989; Bedfordshire, 1990). In 1989 the then Department of Education and Science (DES) sponsored a research project on SDPs which resulted in the publication of national guidance for schools and governors (DES, 1989a, 1991) in which SDPs were promoted as a strategy for "... managing development and change to make the school more effective" (DES, 1989a, page 4). This national acceptance of the key importance of SDPs was further confirmed by "the preparation of an SDP" as a performance indicator in the DES publication on the pilot exercise on School Indicators (DES, 1989b). In addition, the School Management Task Force, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education, published a report in which SDPs incorporating a management and staff development policy were seen as a major characteristic of successful schools (HMSO, 1990).

An examination of the key principles and features of SDPs reveals that in many respects they represent a practical manifestation of the ideas and findings of researchers in four areas of enquiry into schools and the nature of schooling. First, the reliance of SDPs on teamwork, and a sense of ownership by each member of staff and their concern for *what* is to be changed as well as *how* to go about it, have been identified as key factors in the educational change literature (Huberman and Crandall, 1983; Miles, 1983; Fullan, 1990, 1991). Second, diagnostic assessment procedures, which are central to development planning (particularly the 'audit' and initial planning stages) have been found to be important in the literature on school-based review (Hopkins, 1985; Joyce, 1986). Third, the principles and procedures incorporated within SDPs correspond very closely to many of the characteristics of effective

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schools identified in major studies, particularly in Britain, America and Australia (Reynolds, 1976; Rutter et al, 1979; Edmonds, 1983; Mellor and Chapman, 1984; Mortimore et al, 1988; Nias and Southworth, 1989, 1992; Maughan et al, 1990). Fourth, SDPs are seen to be a strategy for school improvement : the inference being that there is a direct link between development planning, classroom practice and pupil learning. Parallel innovations have been researched, for example, in Canada (Stoll and Fink, 1989) and in the United States where "... more than half of the 16,000 School Districts in the Nation have implemented some form of effective school programme" (Cross, 1990, pp. 21-24).

An analysis of the literature from these four fields of enquiry, however, also raises questions in relation to what is becoming a nationwide move towards the adoption of SDPs as a common strategy of school improvement. The literature points out that schools differ in their capacity for change (Dalin, 1989) and that policy development is a very complex process in which schools need to be prepared for the realities of change (Lagerweij and Voogt, 1990). It has been shown that efforts to change must be flexible and strategic planning needs to be sensitive to local circumstances (Crandall et al, 1986).

Furthermore, these and other relevant studies stress the key importance of the culture of the school in relation to its capacity for change and development. The type of leadership (Rutter et al, 1979; Mortimore et al, 1988), school organisation (Miles and Ekholm, 1985), prevailing attitudes (Fullan, 1985, 1991), the need for a united effort to improve (Louis and Miles, 1992) and the political constraints on action (Ball, 1987) are all factors that researchers have found need to be taken into consideration. Fullan (1991) argues that there is a tendency grossly to underestimate the meaning of change and that *"... the interface between individual and collective meaning and action in everyday situations is where change stands or falls"* (page 5). Such a view is shared by those who, in common with Fullan, have studied the different dimensions of change and development (Cuban, 1988; Joyce and Showers, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989).

The difficulty of putting plans into practice, therefore, is a common theme of the literature. A theoretical framework which outlines effective strategies for school improvement has been proposed (Fullan, 1985), and the use of a school plan for development is frequently advocated (Good and Brophy, 1986) but, as yet, there has only been very limited research on the detailed impact of individual school plans and on the criteria necessary for evaluating them. In this context Fullan (1992) argues for the need to combine the findings of school effectiveness research with that of the change literature. It is also argued that a synthesis of school effectiveness and school improvement research is needed (Reynolds et al, 1992) and it has been suggested that SDPs can illustrate some of the ways in which school effectiveness criteria can be integrated within school improvement strategies. *"Our work (on SDPs) fits into the*

current emphasis in educational research on the characteristics of effective schools and the strategies for school improvement " (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991, page 109).

The efficacy of development planning, particularly in primary schools, has not been researched in any detail despite the apparent acceptance by practitioners and policy makers that it is a generally good thing. This project was designed to make up those omissions and to increase knowledge of how planning is executed in primary schools and of whether SDPs have any impact on the learning of pupils. It was also designed to contribute to the growing theory of school improvement.

Objectives

(i) To carry out an empirical investigation of the implementation and impact of school development plans in primary schools in order to provide a contribution to knowledge in the form of a clear and detailed description of an innovative development.

(ii) To contribute to the formulation of theory through the testing of a set of theoretical postulates related to innovative developments in schools.

(iii) To identify good practice and to disseminate this to policy makers and practitioners.

The theoretical postulates with which the project began were :

(i) most staff and the headteacher can agree on a clear mission for the institution;

(ii) a systematic audit of current strategies and weaknesses is an important element;

(iii) a change plan is thoroughly thought through;

(iv) an outside agent is involved;

(v) the implementation of the change plan is supported by all appropriate external authorities;

(vi) an evaluation of progress is used formatively to support the implementation.

Methods

General methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques was adopted in order to combine the rich detail of the case study data with an analysis of a large number of variables. The full list of instruments appears in appendix I. Quantitative analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Selection of sample schools

The criteria for the selection of the schools were that they should provide as wide and as varied a sample as possible. Three LEAs were identified as being representative of an inner city, urban and rural LEA and at different stages in the development and support of school development plans. The relevant primary inspector in each LEA was asked to identify schools interested in school development planning and willing to work as participants in the project. All headteachers of the schools which had been recommended were contacted and a telephone semi-structured interview undertaken. The resulting information and the characteristics of each school were examined against the criteria and the selection of the nine sample schools was made in March 1992.

LEA questionnaire and data collection

A questionnaire seeking information on attitudes towards and support for school development planning was sent out to all one hundred and thirty-five LEAs in England (110), Scotland (12), Wales (8) and Northern Ireland (5). The project obtained a one hundred percent response to the questionnaire and, additionally, received supplementary documentation relating to school development plans from over forty LEAs. The primary inspectors, who worked most closely with the nine sample schools, were also interviewed in order to obtain their perspectives on the support and attitude of the individual LEAs and how these might have an impact on practice in the schools. These interviews provided a contrasting perspective from that expressed by the headteachers of the schools concerned.

Data collection in the schools

This took three main forms :

(i) semi structured interviews with headteachers, two classteachers in each academic year, the chair of governors and a parent governor;
(ii) classroom observation in two classes in each sample school on six separate occasions;
(iii) collection of documentation relating to the school development plan and the school's priorities. This included documentation on the plan itself, policy statements and documents, minutes of relevant meetings, classteacher planning and record keeping.

The children in two classes in each school in 1992/3 were tracked through into the following 1993/4 academic year in order to provide information on their experiences over time. The classroom observation instrument was used to gather evidence from the eighteen classrooms. Planning and record keeping documents were also examined. The data were used to estimate

the impact of the plans and the processes of planning over two years. The instrument was used on six sessions. Each session lasted for at least one hour; the average time spent in the classroom being one and a half hours.

Results

The Local Education Authorities

The evidence from the 135 LEAs, all of which responded to the survey, indicated that their strategic role had been significant in the introduction of development planning into primary schools. The context of external change and support for school development planning in Scotland differed from the rest of the UK. Although the expected content, processes and the use made of the plans varied between LEAs, almost all had policies in place and had provided guidance to schools. Almost all primary schools were working on development plans by 1992, and these were normally revised annually. However, statements of aims tended to be reviewed less frequently, and teaching staff, governors and LEA staff were often involved in the processes less than intended by the policies. Four characteristic types of LEA involvement were identified : minimalist, supportive, proactive and systematic.

The semi structured interviews with the designated LEA inspectors for each of the nine case study schools were undertaken in the summer of 1993. Considerable variation between the three LEAs (each responsible for three of the schools) was found. One LEA had a formal policy established by the education committee requiring schools to produce SDPs. Another had a practice instituted by officers of encouraging schools to do so. Further variation was found between inspectors for each of the nine schools. Five claimed to know well both the headteachers and their staffs. Three inspectors felt they knew the headteachers but not the classteachers, and one was not confident of knowing either at all well. This was reflected in the frequency of school visits : ranging from over six to less than one each year.

Four of the inspectors had ready access to the SDPs produced by the schools. Two received termly updates and a further two could obtain information *"when it was needed"*. One inspector was still awaiting delivery of a school's first SDP. One LEA encouraged its inspectors to become involved in the implementation of the plans, another provided management support to the schools which had completed the implementation phase. Only one LEA sought to evaluate the outcomes of the plans.

The governing bodies

Semi structured interviews with the chair of the governing body and with one of the parent governors were held during the second year of the project. With only eighteen respondents it is difficult to interpret responses clearly at the level of the individual school but the data provide a helpful indication of the way that governors see their responsibilities in relation to school development planning. The role of governors is changing rapidly and it would be dangerous to seek to generalise too much from data collected in 1992.

The governors were aware of school development planning and were supportive of it although only a minority (28%) saw it as capable of *"developing children's education"*. Interestingly, 39 per cent believed that SDPs were required by the DFE and 61 per cent thought they were a formal requirement of the LEA. Of the governors 16 per cent had been involved in planning exercises in connection, for example, with their work, council activity, church or club undertakings.

Over 60 per cent of the governors interviewed reported that they regularly saw the written plan. Over 50 per cent stated that they *always* supported its implementation. However, over 70 per cent of governors were content to delegate the SDP to the headteacher. The overwhelming majority (85%) believed that governors should be involved in some aspects of the implementation of the plan but lacked confidence in their ability to contribute.

The majority of governors believed that monitoring and evaluating the progress and outcomes of the plan were important although, because of their lack of confidence, they preferred to do this by receiving reports from the headteacher rather than by observing classes, holding meetings or workshops, or by talking to teachers and pupils. Even though, in fact, the governors reported that in 50 per cent of the cases the outcomes were not discussed, they expressed a general belief (78%) in the efficacy of the planning processes.

The schools

Our analyses have revealed that school development plans make a difference to schools, but that the nature of that difference is determined by the type of plan in use. At least four different types of school development plans have emerged, each of which has its own set of generic characteristics related to the purpose, context and content of the plan, and the planning process itself. It was found that the particular characteristics of each type of plan determine both the nature and the extent of the impact the plan has on the school as a whole.

We believe that school development planning can be used as a school improvement strategy, but have found that not all school development plans lead to school improvement. The type of plan determines the extent to which both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the school can be improved. Only certain types of plans have a positive impact on the culture of the school in respect of professional relationships, organisational arrangements and opportunities for teachers' own learning. Of these, only one type of plan also leads to discernible improvements in learning opportunities for children.
The main characteristics of the four types of plans that have been identified are as follows.

The **rhetorical plan** is characterised by a lack of a shared sense of ownership and purpose by both the headteacher and the classteachers. The written plan is not a working document and the leadership and management of the process is weak. This results in a limited sense of control over the process and a lack of confidence that benefits will ensue. Neither financial resources nor inservice training are linked with the plan and monitoring and evaluation strategies are weak. The impact of the plan is negative: teachers become frustrated and disillusioned and the headteacher is distanced from the staff.

The **singular plan** is characterised by a sense of ownership and purpose by the headteacher alone. The purpose of the plan is singular in nature. It is used as a tool to improve the efficiency of the management and organisation of the school and provides a means whereby the headteacher can be accountable to governors. It instils a degree of confidence in the headteacher but the sense of control over the process is minimal. The written plan is not a working document and the leadership and management of the process is limited : the headteacher assumes the main responsibility for both. There is little or no financial and professional development to support the implementation of the plan and monitoring and evaluation procedures are weak. The plan has a limited impact. It results in improved efficiency in relation to the overall management and organisation of the school, but it does not have an impact on teachers and children.

The **cooperative plan** is characterised by a cooperative effort to improve. Whilst there is only partial shared ownership by the teaching staff of the content of the plan, there is a general willingness to participate in the process. The plan is perceived as multi-purpose in nature. There is a dual emphasis on improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of the school, with a noticeable focus on school-wide improvements and the professional development of teachers. The leadership of the plan is vested in the headteacher. However, the management of the process is shared amongst some key staff, many of whom are members of the senior management team. The written plan tends to be a working document and the implementation of the plan is supported by financial resources and a linked programme of professional development. Teachers' learning is seen to be important. There is a sense of growing

confidence and control over the process, although involvement in the implementation of the plan tends to be confined to the teaching staff. The process is perceived as complex and continuous, although monitoring and evaluation procedures lack rigour. The impact of the plan is positive. It results in improvements in whole-school management and organisation, professional relationships and teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. Improvements for children are less easy to discern.

The **corporate plan** is characterised by a united effort to improve. There is a strong sense of shared ownership and involvement by the teaching staff and an attempt is made to include others in the process. The plan is multi-purpose in nature and there is a sense of control over the process, and confidence that it will lead to improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. The focus on teaching and learning, especially improvements in the quality of children's learning, is a particular characteristic. The written plan is an open, working document and the leadership of the plan is shared amongst the senior management team. The complexity and continuous nature of the process are recognised and the management of the process is shared by all the staff. Financial resources and staff development are linked to the implementation of the plan and monitoring and evaluation strategies are sound. Teachers have a definite sense of responsibility for the outcome of the plan. The impact of the plan is significant across the school as a whole, for teachers in classrooms and for children's learning. A link can be discerned between school development, teachers' development and children's development. There is evidence of a learning community within the school with headteachers and classteachers exhibiting the characteristics of reflective practitioners, continuously seeking to develop and improve their practice.

The characteristics of these four plans represent a continuum, from the least to the most effective type of plan. In terms of the impact of the plan the continuum goes from the negative to the very positive. However, the typology does not represent a linear, developmental process. It is not a stage theory of development planning. It was only when we examined schools with cooperative and corporate plans that this finding was revealed. For example, two schools were engaged in cooperative and corporate planning respectively, although they had had little or no previous experience of planning in this way. The schools involved in cooperative planning were also on a continuum themselves and demonstrated how schools can change from one type of plan to another. One school was new to this type of plan, having previously had a rhetorical one, whereas, two others were already beginning to demonstrate some of the characteristics of corporate planning.

The characteristics of the typology indicate a differential awareness of the complexity of development planning, with the rhetorical plan being the simplest and the corporate plan, the most sophisticated. What is interesting, however, is that the actual number of components and

priorities in the plan are not a determining factor. What is more important is the focus of the plan and its integrated nature, in particular, the extent to which financial resources and the professional development programme are linked with the implementation of the plan. The characteristics also reveal differences in the degree of confidence and control over the process, not least in relation to monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Whilst it is possible to identify the generic characteristics of each plan, we found that there is no one set of contextual characteristics which delineate one type of plan from another. For example, we found no link between the size, type and location of the school and the type of plan. Nor was the genesis of the plan a critical factor. For example, in one school the plan had been initiated from outside by the LEA, whereas for another, the notion of development planning had come from within the school itself. Despite this, both these schools were engaged in corporate planning. Nor was there a link, in all cases, between the length of experience of planning, either by the school or the headteacher, and the type of plan that was in use. The actual length of headship experience was not a factor either. However, we did find a link between the degree and nature of teacher involvement and collaboration across the types and the extent to which both headteachers and classteachers are able to learn from this experience and so continue to improve the process.

A common feature across the typology was the noticeable professional base of the plans. Whilst there was evidence from schools engaged in cooperative planning and in corporate planning in particular, that they were opening up to include and take account of the views of others (support staff, parents and governors), the content of the plans was determined, on the whole, by the headteacher and the teaching staff. The role of governors - as has been reported - was revealed to be problematic. Moreover, the LEA as noted, featured little in relation to the formulation of plans and their evaluation.

The classrooms

From observations of eighteen classes over two years, it is apparent that many of the priorities identified by headteachers and classteachers cannot be discerned in practice. There was little evidence of planning being focused on ways of working and the use of resources. The full analysis of classroom data remains to be completed but, using the four categories of plan described in the last section, it appears that the various types of display and other evidence were related to the type of plan. Some curriculum areas (for example, science and history) were seen to a greater extent in the corporate group of schools. Similarly, the preliminary analysis of the classroom observations (System for the Classroom Observation of Teaching Strategies - SCOTS) data - made up of judgements about the teacher - pupil interactions and gathered by the same person on six occasions over the two years in each of the nine schools

(108 separate sessions) reveals some evidence of a *difference* between the *corporate* and the other groups of schools. The pupils demonstrated greater industry and greater cooperation between themselves, as well as being more self disciplined. Their teachers, in turn, appeared to allow pupils more responsibility thus giving them a more active role in exercising choice. They also reinforced the pupils with more praise. Finally the observer - who, for most of the project, was blind to the subsequent categorisation of the schools - judged the teaching to be *more interesting* and to be *better organised*. Interestingly - but not perhaps surprisingly - these teachers appeared to be enjoying their role more than did their peers working in schools in the other categories.

The implications of the findings for the theoretical postulates

The original six theoretical postulates were examined in the light of the study.

(i) Most staff and the headteacher can agree on a clear mission for the institution

The findings revealed a link between the extent to which there was a shared sense of agreement between the staff and the headteacher about the purposes and priorities of the plan and the effectiveness of the plan. It was the two schools with the most effective plans that had both established a policy statement about the aims and practices of development planning. In these policy statements a link was made between the school's overall aims and the role of development planning in fulfilling these. What the data did not reveal, was whether, at the audit stage, the schools with cooperative type of plans were making a definite link between the school's overall aims and the priorities for development agreed upon. In respect of the singular type of plan, the purpose of development planning was not to further the school's aims, rather, to improve school-wide management practices. Again, it was not possible to ascertain whether or not, unconnected with the development plan, the staff and the headteacher had agreed a clear mission for the institution. It is interesting that in Scotland, the planning process begins with a re-examination of the school's aims as the first step in the auditing process (SOED, 1993).

(ii) A systematic audit of current strategies and weaknesses is an important element

There was evidence from the way plans were formulated that those involved in cooperative and corporate types of plans were endeavouring to use the development planning process to identify, systematically, priorities for development. The data provided evidence of how the lessons headteachers and classteachers had learnt were being used to help improve all aspects of the planning process. It was the schools in which headteachers and classteachers

demonstrated a sense of control and confidence over the process, that were able to use it as a systematic means of improving practice.

(iii) A change plan is thoroughly thought through

Again, the cooperative and corporate types of plans revealed a growing sophistication in the strategies used to implement the plan. In contrast, the singular and rhetorical types of plans showed serious weaknesses. A particular weakness, however, across almost all the plans, was the lack of identification of success criteria at the formulation stage in respect of the priorities for development chosen. Schools were not asking the question, for example, *"how will the successful implementation of a particular priority be demonstrated?"*

(iv) An outside agent is involved

There was some limited evidence of the involvement of an outside agent in the form of the local education authority. Some examples were provided by the schools of specific support with the implementation of plans, particularly in relation to the provision of inservice courses and the use of advisers in school. However, although the headteachers mentioned visits and inspections by the local inspectors and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), there was little or no evidence of the extent to which these were directly related to the SDP. The lack of clarity as to whether the plan had to be reported to the LEA, or the DFE, at either the formulation or the evaluation stages, was symptomatic of uncertainty about the role of outside agents. From the responses there was no sense of a systematic approach by the LEA to SDPs. This was perhaps a reflection of their rapidly changing circumstances at the time of the interviews.

(v) The implementation of the change-plan is supported by all appropriate external authorities

As already indicated in (iv) above, there was limited evidence of support being provided from outside. There did not appear to be an infrastructure at LEA level to support the implementation of the SDP. This is a particular cause for concern in respect of the rhetorical and singular types of plans. The negative effect of the former, and the limited impact of the latter, indicated the need for external intervention to ensure that the headteachers were able to change to a different, more effective type of plan.

(vi) An evaluation of progress is used formatively to support the implementation

This aspect of the school development planning process was found to be the weakest. The absence of regular monitoring and well developed evaluation strategies was a noticeable feature across a number of the schools. Those involved in cooperative and corporate types of plans were aware of the need to improve this aspect of the process. The schools engaged in the corporate type of plan were using the most comprehensive range of quantitative and qualitative evidence to support the implementation process. The headteachers and the classteachers in the schools were demonstrating the characteristics of reflective practitioners. They were constantly evaluating progress and seeking to improve the process.

These postulates were focused on school improvement. They reflect aspects of planning concerned with the formulation, implementation and evaluation of SDPs which were deemed to be important conditions for success at the outset of the research. There clearly is a relationship between those concerned with school-based actions by headteachers and classteachers and school improvement. They were factors which appeared to contribute towards the effectiveness of the plan. In respect of the two postulates concerned with external involvement and support, (iv) and (v), there is some evidence that schools valued and took advantage of professional development opportunities provided by the local authority. Beyond that we failed to find support, for example, that would concern the external evaluation of the plan and the strengthening of a school's own planning strategies and self evaluation processes. Given the general finding about the differential impact of plans, and the specific finding about weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation strategies, this is a cause for concern.

The overall findings of this study about the characteristics of the different types of plans in use, indicate that the original postulates generally hold up but fail to reflect the complexity of development planning. This study has revealed that the more effective the plan, the more complex are its characteristics.

Future research priorities

1. To study the resilience of the typology to changes over time.
2. To investigate the evolving role of governors in school development planning.
3. To explore the replication of the typology and cross-phase similarities and differences and examine cross-cultural implications.
4. To examine the impact of the OFSTED inspection programme on school development planning.

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